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UNCLAS VILNIUS 000733

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/NB AND EUR/OHI

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PREL LH

SUBJECT: NO DESECRATION OF GRAVES SEEN BY LOCAL JEWISH LEADERS

1. Summary: We met with Rabbi Chizkiva Kalmanowitz, an American citizen resident in Israel, on June 29 to discuss his concerns about construction work on the site of a known Jewish cemetery in central Vilnius. Rabbi Kalmanowitz was in Lithuania for 18 hours as part of a survey trip to Jewish heritage sites in Eastern Europe. He alleges that the construction is disturbing graves on the site. The two principal leaders of the Lithuanian Jewish community, who rarely agree on anything, both told us they do not share Kalmanowitz's concerns. End Summary.

2. Rabbi Kalmanowitz painted a grim picture of a ravaged gravesite in his meeting with us. We visited the site and did not see anything like the upturned graves with numerous remains that the Rabbi indicated he had seen. We received from the Department a photo that shows what could be possible remains, but we were unable to determine where on the construction site it was taken.

3. We contacted Rabbi Sholom Ber Krinsky, an American citizen who is the local Chabad rabbi, on June 30 to discuss the situation. He told us that he did not share Rabbi Kalmanowitz's concerns about the site. Krinsky said that during the 2001-2003 construction of a bridge that is approximately 30 meters from the current construction site, Vilnius municipal authorities were very conscientious in ensuring that the local Jewish community was able to relocate any disturbed remains. Krinsky also commented that the owners of the new building would have had to hire archeologists and other specialists to verify what would need to be done on the site before receiving their construction permit. He told us that Chabad had previously viewed the site and had not found any problems, and that they will contact us if they discover anything amiss.

4. Lina Gubreviciute of the MFA's Americas Division told us July 13 that the construction firm did indeed commission an archeological survey. Gubreviciute said that the findings, which have not yet been circulated, show that there is no longer a major burial site at this location. (Note: Most interested parties believe that this cemetery was effectively destroyed by the Soviets, as they removed the gravestones and built several buildings, including a large aquatic center, on the land. End Note)

5. Simonas Alperavicius, the president of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, offered us on July 13 largely the same view as Rabbi Krinsky, his frequent antagonist. Alperavicius said the city government's actions during the prior construction on the site had been commendable. He said that he was aware of the current construction, and was not concerned that it may be disturbing graves. Alperavicius also commented that he thought the Jewish community had most likely removed all remains from the current site during the bridge construction two years ago.

6. Comment: Issues relating to Jewish heritage in Lithuania are a top priority for this Mission. We therefore do not take Rabbi Kalmanowitz's charges lightly. We are reassured, however, by the opinions of the two leading figures in the Vilnius Jewish community about the construction project, and note that the GOL's track record on Jewish cemetery issues is positive. We will continue to monitor this situation closely, working with the GOL and local Jewish community, and will report any additional information we receive.
Kelly